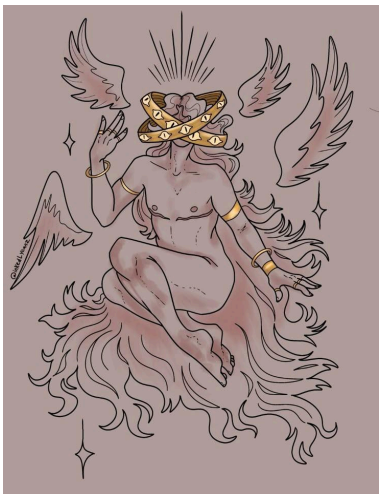
The Testimony of Truth



In *Against Heresies* 3.11.9, Irenaeus mentions that the Valentinians possess a work called "The Gospel of Truth." The third tractate of Codex I happens to begin with precisely those words, and most scholars are therefore inclined to identify the tractate with the work mentioned by Irenaeus. The tractate is not furnished with a title in the manuscript, but it can hardly be a coincidence that its opening words are identical with the title mentioned by Irenaeus. It is more reasonable to assume that the work was habitually referred to by its opening words, and that Irenaeus therefore understood them as its title.

The Gospel of Truth is not itself a "gospel" in the sense of other works that bear that name, nor is it intended to be. Instead, it is a discourse on the gospel, understood as the good news about the appearance of the Savior on earth and the message he brought to humanity. 1The Gospel of Truth gives an interpretation of that event and explains how everything has been changed as a consequence of it. A peculiar feature of the text, however, is that the story of salvation seems to unfold simultaneously on two distinct levels. On one level we hear about the appearance of the Savior in the world of human beings: he taught them the truth, but he was persecuted by his enemies and was crucified and killed. However, his death brought life to mortal humans, and his instruction woke them up from forgetfulness and made them return to the Father, the source of their being. Parallel with this account, however, another, more mythological story is told in the text as a kind of metanarrative. This story tells how the world came into existence as the result of ignorance. Initially, the All, the Entirety of aeons or eternal realms, existed inside the Father, who was so vast and unfathomable that they were unable to perceive him. Because of this, ignorance, anguish, and terror took hold of the aeons; Error was produced instead of truth, and on this illusive basis the world was created as a solidification of ignorance and fear, a "fog."

The work of the Savior was not only to bring knowledge to earthly humans, but also to rectify the cosmic error. He revealed the unknown Father to the aeons and gave them a proper, harmonious relationship to their originator. Although the Savior, as a historical person, is identical with Jesus, he is also, from a higher and more fundamental perspective, the Son, the Word, and the Name of the Father; he is the first emanation, who manifests the Father to the aeons and causes them to come into being as perfect beings. Thus, the redemption of humans effected by Jesus in this world is a part of, and reflects, a larger process of cosmic scale and ontological significance, a process by which the aeons are properly brought into being and given knowledge about the Father. The discourse in the Gospel of Truth moves back and forth between the two levels, between the historical and the mythical, and one gets the impression that blurring the distinctions between them is a deliberate strategy of the writer.

An additional characteristic of the Gospel of Truth is its highly inventive use of images. For example, a long section is devoted to the concept of "the book of the living" (19, 34–23, 17). The theme is introduced following the presentation of the Savior as a teacher: instructing "the little children," he revealed the book, whose contents were the Father's thoughts, hidden from before creation. Naturally, therefore, the contents of the book is knowledge. However, the book is also compared to a will that lay hidden but was made public after the testator's death. Moreover, in being crucified, Jesus posted the book on the cross—thus it is also compared to a public proclamation. Further, the book of the living is a roll of names where those who have been appointed for salvation are written down. Finally, opening the book means that the names are called out, and whoever is called listens, turns around, and hastens toward the one who is calling. Even this list of meanings does not exhaust the richness of the symbolism of the "book" in this section of the Gospel of Truth, but may serve to give an impression of the author's sophisticated use of imagery.

In its composition, the Gospel of Truth moves from one theme to the next, prompted more by the association of images than by a linear logic of exposition. Thus, the initial description of the origin of error and illusion leads to the presentation of the Savior as the teacher. This in turns leads to the theme of the book of the living, which the Savior revealed. Next, a description of the book as a unity composed of many letters evolves into a portrait of the Savior as the Word that goes forth from the Father and permeates the All (23, 17–24, 9). The Word, moreover, is the Son, who reveals the Father, replacing ignorance with knowledge and dispersion with unity—in short, deficiency with fullness.

Unity and fullness then become the theme of the following section, where another central image is unfolded: the house and the jars (25, 25–26, 27). One moves to a new house, but only the good jars will be taken along —that is, the ones that are unbroken and full. The others are discarded. In this section, a tone of eschatological judgment is also present, though it is not clear precisely what the sorting of the jars refers to. Is it the general separation of spiritual and nonspiritual people that resulted from the appearance of the Savior? Or does the passage allude to a specific historical event, perhaps the moment when the Valentinian church separated from the rest of the Christian movement? Of course, the one interpretation does not exclude the other.

Next, the division between those who received the revelation and those who did not is radicalized as a distinction between being and not being: receiving knowledge means truly to come into being, to be manifested, whereas those who remain in error do not really exist at all (27, 34–28, 32). This idea inspires another impressive image, that of cosmic existence as a nightmarish dream, whose unreal nature is understood only when the dreamer wakes up (28, 32–30, 23). Aroused, the dreamer then receives the spirit, which enables him to stand up. The spirit, moreover, makes some people perceive the nature of the Savior (while others do not understand). He now becomes the way (31, 29), 2 a catchword that in turn serves to introduce the parable of the lost sheep and the good shepherd (31, 35–32, 37)—a favorite topic among the Valentinians. The good shepherd labored on the Sabbath, which means the world, and he brought the sheep into the higher day, which is pure light.

A paraenetic section next prescribes the behavior appropriate for those who belong to the heavenly day (33, 1–32); and those who do the Father's will in this way are described as his "fragrance" (34, 1). The text then reverts to the theme of the deficiency that has been transformed into fullness and to the image of the jars, and this time the text introduces the topic of anointing: the full jars are those that have been sealed with ointment (34, 34–36, 35). This is the clearest reference to ritual practices in the Gospel of Truth.

Somewhat abruptly, the discourse now turns, with a protological perspective, to a description of the Word, which has revealed the hidden Thought of the Father, followed by a famous section where the Son is portrayed as the Father's Name—an idea that serves to express the indissoluble relationship between Father and Son as well as the Son's role as the revealer of the unnamable Father of All (38, 6–41, 3). Finally, by stating that the Son revealed the origins and the destiny of the Father's children, the text is able to arrive at its concluding, eschatological theme: the place of rest in the Fullness.

PYTHIA, THE DELPHIAN ORACLE, SEATED ON THE TRIPOD OVER THE SACRED CAVERN.

This impressive composition, which adroitly chains together and inventively elaborates a series of striking images in a discourse interwoven with subtle allusions to New Testament texts, is no doubt the work of an important figure. Who he is we do not know. What we do know is that the Gospel of Truth known to Irenaeus was used by the Valentinians. The Gospel of Truth that we have was used by the Tripartite Tractate, an indubitably Valentinian text. The general vocabulary and the creative use of images are suggestive of Valentinianism. The Gospel of Truth, the Treatise on Resurrection, and the Interpretation of Knowledge have many similarities, and the latter two texts are considered by most to be Valentinian. Moreover, these three tractates belong to the genres of homilies and letters, genres known to have been used in particular by the Valentinians.

On the other hand, the Gospel of Truth lacks any clear references to the distinctive mythology of Valentinianism, such as the myth of the fall of Sophia or the cosmogony and the anthropogony found in many of the systematic treatises. Instead of the story of Sophia's passion, which gave rise to matter, her subsequent repentance and joy at the vision of the Savior, from which soul and spirit originated, and the shaping of the cosmos from these three substances, the Gospel of Truth tells the allegorical tale of Error, from which the material cosmos came into being. This cosmogony is not only different from the standard Valentinian myth, it also implies a distinctly more negative view of the cosmos and a more dualistic ontology than is the case with Valentinian cosmology in general. According to the normal Valentinian position, matter and passion are certainly evil, but the cosmos, as matter and soul substance that have been given form and order by the Savior and the redeemed Sophia, is relatively good, "useful" for the plan of salvation. However, it may be possible to explain this discrepancy by hypothesizing that the Gospel of Truth was written at a time before the Valentinian systems had been fully developed. It may also be observed that a homily is a different genre from the systematic treatise, which means, first, that its main purpose is not the exposition of doctrine, but the exhortation of the faithful, and, second, that its style of address and rhetorical imagery may be more dualistic than in a treatise, since it aims to change the outlook and the behavior of its audience.

Although questions remain, it is, on balance, most reasonable to assign the Gospel of Truth to the Valentinian tradition. This is also the judgment of the majority of scholars. Whether the homily was actually composed by Valentinus himself, as some believe, cannot be confidently known. 5 However, the quality of the composition and the authority of the voice that speaks in it do point in the direction of the heresiarch himself, rather than some minor and unknown figure. Moreover, we know that Valentinus wrote homilies (Clement of Alexandria quotes from some of them), whereas it is doubtful whether he ever composed a systematic treatise. The lack of allusions to themes from the Valentinian systems is also suggestive of an early phase in the history of the movement. If the identification of the tractate with the writing known to Irenaeus is accepted, a date before 180 must in any case be assumed. In conclusion, the attribution to Valentinus is an attractive hypothesis, though it must inevitably be accompanied by a question mark.

In addition to the complete copy of the Gospel of Truth in Codex I, some fragments of a different Coptic translation of the writing are preserved in Codex XII. Unfortunately, the fragments are too small to contribute substantially to textual criticism and to the study of the history of the text.

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